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ABSTRACT

Traditionally an urban problem, gang involvement is growing on Native American reservations. This digest examines common factors in gang development and one tribe's response through a Native-centric education and juvenile justice system. The sum of handicaps associated with gang involvement has been termed "multiple marginality," and reservation gang members have been found to be adrift, marginalized counterparts of their non-Indian peers. The Pima-Maricopa tribe has developed a unique approach, based on communal responsibility, to deal with gang youths. The tribe recently built a high school, an alternative school for students with a history of delinquency, and a juvenile detention facility with a special education program. The three programs work as a unit to develop long-term plans and joint accountability for individual students. No matter which institution gang members end up in, they have access to extracurricular activities, counseling and therapy programs, tutoring with a tribal elder, mentorship from a tribal council member, and participation in tribal ceremonies. Their parents are called nightly, and when needed, students receive special education classes in an affirming, structured environment. The case of one ninth-grade gang member, and the opportunities this approach gives him, are described. (Contains 29 references.) (TD)

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Can Education Play a Role in the Prevention of Youth Gangs in Indian Country? One Tribe's Approach

Arturo Hernandez

Traditionally an urban problem, gang involvement is growing on Native American reservations. While research is nascent on this phenomenon, Indian communities are developing interesting and promising remedies. This Digest examines common factors in gang involvement and one tribe's response through a Native-centric education and juvenile justice system.

Gang Involvement: Common Factors and Characteristics

Poverty, family stress, and school dropout characterize the lives of gang members. More than 70 percent of incarcerated delinquents also have learning disabilities (Morgan, 1979; Murphy, 1986; Stanley & Hudson, 1981) which factor into the chronic truancy, school failure, and alienation that accompany gang involvement (Hernandez, 1998; Huff, 1998).

Incarceration among gang members is normative, as are drug use, violence, and criminal activity. The literature has long reported that underlying these negative attributes is a detachment from hope—gang members believe they have nothing to lose. Gang youth seldom finish school, have few prospects for employment, and find conventional opportunities out of their reach (Curry & Spergel, 1988; Hernandez, 1998; Lattimore et al., 1995; Richardson, 2001; Rodriguez, 1993; Thrasher, 1936; Vigil, 1988 & 1989).

The sum of handicaps associated with gang involvement has been termed "multiple marginality" by Vigil (1988) and discussed by others (Hill et al., 1999; Loeber & Farrington, 1998; U.S. Department of Justice, 1999), including factors specific to girls (Campbell, 1967; Moore & Hagedorn, 2001).

Indian Communities and Gang Involvement

Most Indian reservations lack basic infrastructure, including phone service, adequate housing, and reliable health care. Few jobs are available and life expectancies are as low as 48 years (American Indian Relief Council, n.d.; Tiller Research, Inc., 1996). The high rates of adolescent suicide, depression, alcoholism, and school dropout indicate the toll that chronic poverty takes on reservation youth (Arrillaga, 2001; O'Connell, 1987). In spite of these, tribal children traditionally were shielded from gang activity by two conditions: the presence of a cohesive, tribal culture providing participation and identity, even for troubled youth; and a rural isolation that made it difficult for teenagers to find drugs, cars, weapons, and populated places to commit crime. The recent surge in gang activity reflects both a growing loss of culture and community and a growing exposure to urban environments (Conway, 1999; Donnermeyer et al., 1996; Devitt, 2002; Hailer, 1998; Hailer & Hart, 1999; Juneau, 1998).

It is *highly significant* that the only on-site assessment of reservation gang activity, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) study "Finding and Knowing the Gang *Nayee* on the Navajo Nation" (1995), reported that Navajo gang members were likely to be nonspeakers of their native tongue; report severe problems in school; come from urbanized, poor, and generally dysfunctional families; and lack contact with clan members and tribal ceremonies. In other words, they were the adrift, marginalized equivalents of their non-Indian peers.

One Tribe's Response to Gang Involvement Among Its Youth

The Pima-Maricopa lost the traditional farming culture when the diversion of the Salt River destroyed the tribe's extensive irrigation system. Endemic poverty replaced agriculture. Pima language and culture collapsed under the assimilation policies of the Bureau of Indian Affairs' (BIA) boarding school system. After the close of the BIA schools, the Pima-Maricopa were required to bus their children into the Phoenix metropolitan area to attend school. With phone service unavailable to reservation homes and few families owning transportation, little interaction occurred between school and family. Indian students rarely finished high school, and the majority dropped out much earlier. The combined effects of long-term poverty, loss of tradition, and an erratic education led to a gang problem severe enough to attract national attention (Campbell, 1997).

The Pima-Maricopa response has involved using a tribal sensibility to transform how conventional institutions deal with troubled youth. The tribe recently built a high school, an alternative school for students with a significant history of delinquency, and a juvenile detention facility with a special education program. The divergence from how these kinds of institutions usually treat gang youth includes these requirements: students at the alternative school have access to all extracurricular activities at the high school, jailed students have a rich and therapeutic curriculum, and the three programs work as a unit to develop long-term plans and joint accountability for individual students. Although this project has not been formally evaluated, the story of Lorenzo (name changed) will illustrate how establishing communal responsibility for a troubled youth has kept one gang member from slipping outside the community's obligation to raise him.

Not Out of Sight and Not Out of Mind: Keeping Troubled Youth Within the Tribal Circle

Lorenzo started 9th grade at the tribal high school with a history of trouble and a well-developed gang persona. He was on probation and had been expelled at two off-reservation schools. The tribal school principal, a school counselor, and directors from the alternative and detention programs met with Lorenzo and his parents. This group established a working plan for Lorenzo's academic and personal development.

The plan required Lorenzo to play on the high school football team, which was coached by a group of dedicated Indian men, including the campus police officer. Through much effort, the football team had become a neutral place where kids from different gangs could interact, become school heroes, and develop an identity beyond the gang.

In addition to football, they enrolled Lorenzo in the art program, which the Navajo assistant principal developed and co-taught. This would provide an additional avenue for mentorship and self-esteem.

The school counselor arranged testing for learning disabilities. This led to an important placement in a Native Studies/English/Science track designed around reading improvement and special education support.

The plan initially proved successful. Lorenzo passed courses, did well in football, and received his first athletic award. He

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fought once on campus, and was sent to a room where unruly students spend days in seclusion with a stern Indian mentor.

During the second semester, Lorenzo created another altercation. When a teacher intervened, he struck her. The police picked him up and took him into detention.

The assaulted teacher visited Lorenzo that evening, along with the high school's assistant principal and the detention facility's special education director. Their purpose was to let him know that while he had earned incarceration, he was still part of his school and his tribe, and he was not being abandoned. The teacher expressed her continued faith in him, and Lorenzo apologized for striking her. That same week the high school principal made a request to the Tribal Court: If his behavior warranted, would the court allow Lorenzo to practice with the football team once a week and play on Friday nights? The court agreed this would be good for Lorenzo, and tribal police volunteered to provide the necessary escort and supervision.

While in detention, special student computers transmitted Lorenzo's academic work to the alternative school, where it was decided he would transfer after his incarceration. This computer program allowed both locations to communicate about his progress, and eased his transfer at the end of his sentence. The software and networking for this process involved a sizeable investment by the tribe, but the transition from jail to the alternative school would not involve an interruption in curriculum or loss of time toward graduation.

While in detention, Lorenzo benefited from a horse therapy program, art classes, tutoring with a tribal elder, and mentorship from a Tribal Council member. He had the opportunity to listen to the same invited speakers as had visited the high school and alternative school, received Pima language classes, and took part in the Brushing Ceremony given by a Pima medicine woman.

In the spring, students at the high school and alternative school entered the tribal arts competition at the Heard museum, had a student art sale, and produced a volume of student poetry. Incarcerated students had their own art sale, produced a literary magazine, and staged a show of horsemanship. Lorenzo again made an important contribution and furthered a positive identity.

Upon release, administrators and parents greeted him and planned his entry into the alternative school. Opposing gang members were also present. The latter were invited in order to get written and verbal understandings that there would be no conflict when Lorenzo returned to campus. Because several gangs are represented and study together in the alternative school, transitional meetings address this issue openly and firmly. This meeting was positive, welcoming, and clear as to expectations, standards, and hopes.

Like all students at the alternative school, Lorenzo will continue to participate in the art, Native studies, and athletic programs available at the regular high school. He will learn to deal with opposing gang members who receive instruction in his same classroom, and benefit from special education teachers in an affirming, structured environment. His parents will be called nightly to speak of progress or problems, and he will receive regular counseling, special field trips, and attention to learning and emotional disabilities. In time, he may exit the alternative school and re-enroll in regular classes at the high school, or choose to stay until he graduates.

This process of support and inclusion will continue until Lorenzo becomes an adult. While his behavior may require more or less contained and supervised settings, the option he does not have is to escape from the education, affirmation, and discipline essential to becoming a contributing adult. The principal may have to visit him in jail, the coach meet with judges, the community apply more of its resources, but he will learn to read, get a job, learn his history, study his language, and use his gifts productively.

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